



# The Rise and Fall of the HyFlex Approach in Mexico

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## Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the world turned to online tools as a means of ensuring continued access to education, highlighting possibilities for innovation, particularly in contexts like Mexico, where the use of edtech was not previously prevalent. When educational institutions reopened their physical campuses, many schools and universities considered a hybrid, flexible (HyFlex) approach as a way of catering for different needs. While research findings on students' perspectives tend to be positive, the implementation of HyFlex courses has shown some challenges. Issues reported by teachers relate to poor technical infrastructure, work overload and lack of guidance. The initial excitement for the HyFlex approach has subdued. However, an openness to innovation is still there, ready to be exploited.

**Keywords** HyFlex · Hybrid education · Mexico · Flexible learning

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the world turned to online tools as a means of ensuring continued access to education. However, the extensive use of videoconferencing that followed suggests that many educators were not capitalising on the affordances of asynchronicity (Bond et al., 2021). Indeed, the Covid-19 crisis uncovered gaps in teacher training related to technology-enhanced learning (Trust & Whalen, 2020). Reported issues include a lack of preparedness to teach online, inconsistent institutional support, unstable Internet connections and limited digital literacy (Armellini & Padilla Rodriguez, 2022; Maatuk et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, the rapid digitalisation of learning and teaching (e.g., Skulmowski & Rey, 2020) highlighted possibilities for innovation, particularly in contexts like Mexico, where the use of educational technology (edtech) was not previously prevalent (Padilla Rodríguez et al., 2021).

When educational institutions reopened their physical campuses, they faced concerns about the health threat posed by simply returning to the previous on-site delivery mode. While some students were waiting impatiently for face-to-face courses to resume, others wanted to keep learning online. Moreover, government regulations in some regions required social distancing and

thus prevented classrooms from being used to their full capacity. Questions emerged on how to cater for these different needs. In Mexico, many schools and universities considered a hybrid, flexible (HyFlex) approach as a way forward – the new normal (e.g., Rodríguez Palacios, 2021; Treviño, 2020).

HyFlex courses are multi-modal, combining virtual and on-site activities. Learners can decide on a daily or weekly basis whether they want to participate online or attend face-to-face class sessions, according to their preference, needs and availability (Beatty, 2019). Many students appreciate this flexibility (e.g., Binnewies & Wang, 2019; Gobeil-Proulx, 2019). Satisfaction and learning outcomes are expected to be similar between the different delivery modes (e.g., Lakhali et al., 2014; Lightner & Lightner-Laws, 2016). This HyFlex approach seemed the perfect solution, at first.

Research on the effectiveness of HyFlex courses has focused on students' perspectives (Raes et al., 2020). While experiences are mostly positive, some learners have reported feeling left out. Those who participate remotely might perceive that they receive less teacher support than their on-site peers. At the same time, those who are in the classroom might feel neglected when too much time is spent solving technical problems (Huang et al., 2017; Laforune & Lakhali, 2019). The learning experience is not necessarily equivalent for all participants.

Educators in charge of implementing a HyFlex approach sometimes struggle. They are expected to simultaneously

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manage two audiences and thus, require a high level of coordination. They need to adapt their usual teaching practices and tools to accommodate the conditions of both remote and on-site learners (Ørngreen et al., 2015). A study conducted at two American universities concluded that experienced instructors could comfortably facilitate their courses without the aid of technical staff if they had face-to-face groups of eight or fewer students (Zydney et al., 2019). However, in many contexts, academics have considerably larger classes (e.g., + 30 learners) and no additional support.

In late 2021, when the HyFlex trend was at its peak in Mexico, I conducted a professional development workshop with university teachers. Using a *padlet* (a virtual bulletin board), ten of them shared the challenges they were facing when trying to implement the HyFlex approach. Their participation was optional, voluntary and anonymous. The general feeling was that they were trying to do too much, at the same time, without the necessary conditions for success. Three main themes emerged: technical issues, work overload and lack of guidance.

- 1) **Technical issues.** Mentions of the poor technological infrastructure available were frequent. Teachers had limited access to digital devices (i.e., computers, laptops, tablets) with adequate webcams and microphones. Videoconferencing was a challenge, exacerbated by a lack of a stable broadband connection on campus. When several classes were streaming at the same time, the Internet failed. Moreover, their institution did not provide paid versions of some useful online tools, such as Zoom or Google Meet. The result was that virtual meetings had a 45- or 60-min time limit, and teachers had to create several sessions for students to connect to.
- 2) **Work overload.** Planning and managing the logistics of HyFlex courses were perceived as time-consuming, demanding tasks. For each class session, teachers had to prepare and deliver two different tracks, one for on-site students and another one for those participating online. Their workload increased considerably. One of the teachers worded their perception as follows: “It is impossible for me to pay attention [at the same time] to both the face-to-face and the remote groups, coordinate activities, receive their contributions, check their answers...”.
- 3) **Lack of guidance.** Teachers reported having had to learn on their own, in record time, what they knew about the implementation of HyFlex courses. They still had questions they did not know how to answer: Should they foster interactions between on-site and online learners? If yes, how could they do it? Which technologies should they use? Was it necessary to have a third option for remote students who could not participate synchronously? How could they coordinate to support everyone at all times?

Some academics were overwhelmed and stressed. Others faced the situation with a positive attitude and aimed to motivate their colleagues by sharing possible solutions (e.g., having videos as a backup). The comments offered by these workshop participants echo anecdotal evidence on the experiences of implementing HyFlex courses in other Mexican institutions. Decisions had been taken without fully assessing the capabilities of the existing infrastructure, without consulting the teachers in charge of delivery, and in some cases, without offering explicit guidance on how to design effective HyFlex courses.

Around the country, it eventually became apparent that contextual limitations hindered the previously foreseen benefits of HyFlex learning. The initial excitement subdued and was replaced with concern. Once restrictions on the number of students allowed in physical classrooms were lifted, many institutions that had embraced the concept of simultaneously using online and face-to-face delivery modes moved away from it. The HyFlex approach seemed to lose its relevance in the Mexican educational scenario. However, these and other experiences with technologies have encouraged the exploration of new learning and teaching strategies. The use of edtech has increased. An openness to innovation is still there, ready to be exploited.

The new path for education is evolving. For it to be successful, context is key. What works in a region with a stable technological infrastructure might not work in a place where resources are lacking. Asynchronicity might offer affordances that are currently disregarded. Reported challenges need to be addressed. Finally, no strategy should be disconnected from the people who participate in its implementation. Both students and teachers should have a say on the approach to adopt. Creating the future is a shared task.

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